

Reconfiguring Gender Norms: Patriarchy, Female Desire, and Subversive Agency in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

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Abstract— *Girish Karnad's Nagamandala (1988) occupies a prominent place in modern Indian drama for its critical engagement with patriarchy, gender oppression, and female subjectivity. Drawing upon Kannada folk traditions and oral narratives, Karnad reconstructs the experiences of women trapped within restrictive social institutions, particularly marriage. Through the character of Rani, the play interrogates the silencing of women's emotions, sexuality, and agency within patriarchal culture. The magical intervention of the Naga not only transforms Rani's personal life but also symbolically challenges the rigid structures governing female chastity and obedience. By combining folklore, symbolism, and magical realism, Karnad creates a dramatic space where women's desires are validated and oppressive gender norms are questioned. This article examines how Nagamandala redefines concepts such as fidelity, purity, and marital duty while simultaneously exposing the hypocrisy of patriarchal morality. The study further explores Karnad's use of folk motifs and narrative multiplicity as tools of feminist resistance. Ultimately, the paper argues that Nagamandala remains a powerful feminist text that continues to resonate in contemporary discussions on gender justice and women's empowerment in India.*



Keywords— *Girish Karnad, Nagamandala, Feminist Drama, Patriarchy and Gender Oppression, Women's Agency and Empowerment*

Introduction

Girish Karnad is widely recognized for blending mythology, folklore, and contemporary social concerns in Indian theatre. In *Nagamandala*, he adapts two Kannada folk tales and transforms them into a compelling critique of patriarchal structures embedded in Indian society. The play narrates the story of Rani, a young woman trapped in an emotionally barren marriage with Appanna, who neglects and confines her while maintaining an extramarital relationship. The entry of the Naga, a cobra assuming Appanna's form, introduces a magical dimension that becomes central to Rani's emotional and psychological awakening.

The play functions on multiple levels—as folklore, fantasy, psychological exploration, and feminist critique. Karnad's dramatic technique employs storytelling traditions traditionally associated with women, thereby foregrounding female voices and experiences often

excluded from dominant patriarchal discourse. The layered narrative structure and symbolic imagery allow Karnad to question conventional understandings of marriage, chastity, and feminine virtue.

Patriarchal Oppression and Domestic Confinement

One of the most significant themes in *Nagamandala* is the oppressive nature of patriarchal marriage. Rani enters married life with innocence and hope but soon discovers that marriage has reduced her to isolation and silence. Appanna exercises complete authority over her movements and emotions, locking her inside the house and denying her companionship. His treatment of Rani reflects the deeply rooted patriarchal belief that women are possessions meant to serve male interests.

Karnad presents Appanna as a representative of male privilege and social hypocrisy. While society tolerates his extramarital relationship, Rani is subjected to public

humiliation and suspicion merely because of her pregnancy. This unequal moral framework reveals how patriarchal societies regulate female sexuality while granting freedom and immunity to men.

Rani's loneliness becomes symbolic of the emotional alienation experienced by many women within traditional marital structures. Her repeated longing for conversation and affection emphasizes the denial of emotional fulfillment in patriarchal households. Karnad thereby critiques not only physical oppression but also the psychological consequences of gender-based control.

Female Desire and Emotional Awakening

A major feminist dimension of the play lies in its treatment of female desire. Through the magical presence of the Naga, Karnad creates a narrative space in which Rani experiences affection, intimacy, and emotional recognition for the first time. Unlike Appanna, the Naga listens to her, speaks lovingly, and fulfills her emotional needs. This transformation marks Rani's evolution from passive victimhood to self-awareness.

The use of magical realism enables Karnad to discuss female sexuality without directly confronting social taboos. The supernatural relationship between Rani and the Naga symbolizes suppressed desires that patriarchal culture attempts to silence. Rather than portraying female desire as immoral, the play legitimizes it as a natural and essential part of human identity.

Kurudavva and the Flames also play crucial symbolic roles in supporting women's voices. The Flames, who narrate stories exchanged among women, represent collective female memory and oral tradition. Through these figures, Karnad acknowledges storytelling as a form of resistance against patriarchal silence.

The Chastity Test and Subversion of Patriarchal Morality

The snake ordeal constitutes the dramatic climax of the play and serves as Karnad's strongest critique of patriarchal notions of chastity and purity. When accused of infidelity, Rani is forced to prove her innocence before the village elders by holding a cobra. However, her statement during the ordeal is intentionally ambiguous, allowing her to speak the truth while simultaneously exposing the absurdity of patriarchal judgment.

The cobra's protective response transforms Rani from an accused woman into a divine figure worthy of worship. This moment symbolically overturns patriarchal authority. The same society that doubted and humiliated her suddenly elevates her to the status of a goddess. Karnad thereby reveals the instability and contradiction inherent in patriarchal morality.

The ordeal also recalls the trial by fire undergone by Sita in the *Ramayana*. However, unlike the traditional epic narrative that reinforces female submission, *Nagamandala* reinterprets the ordeal as an act of resistance and empowerment. Rani emerges not as a passive sufferer but as a woman who reclaims control over her identity and social position.

Ambiguity and the Limits of Liberation

Although the play concludes with apparent reconciliation and transformation, Karnad avoids presenting a simplistic vision of liberation. Rani gains recognition and authority within the household, and Appanna appears remorseful and transformed. Nevertheless, her empowerment remains largely confined within domestic boundaries.

The ambiguous ending reflects the complexity of social change in patriarchal societies. While individual transformation is possible, deeply entrenched gender hierarchies continue to shape social realities. Karnad's refusal to provide a completely idealistic resolution strengthens the realism and intellectual depth of the play.

CONCLUSION

Nagamandala remains one of the most influential feminist plays in modern Indian literature. Through folklore, symbolism, and magical realism, Girish Karnad challenges patriarchal constructions of femininity, chastity, and marriage. Rani's journey from silence and oppression to selfhood and recognition represents the struggle of women seeking dignity and emotional fulfillment within restrictive social systems.

The play not only critiques patriarchal hypocrisy but also celebrates the transformative power of storytelling and female imagination. By validating women's voices and desires, Karnad redefines the possibilities of gender relations in Indian society. Even today, *Nagamandala* continues to inspire critical discussions on gender justice, female agency, and the politics of cultural tradition.

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